

Speaking for Myself

Doctors' club: An experiment in education

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All of us doctors must continually update our knowledge and skills to deliver effective healthcare to our patients and also to earn an honest and decent living. After leaving the institution that trained us in our respective field of activity, most of us become members of one professional body or the other. The purpose of these societies is two-fold. One is learning, and another is socializing. Socializing involves meeting friends and sometimes families and having (a drink) and a meal later.

Some 40 years back, I realized that there were some inherent problems that I felt impossible to solve in these meetings. First is the learning part. The learning needs of us general practitioners (GPs) are broad-based and cover a whole range of subspecialties. It soon became apparent to me that the organizers rarely took the learning needs as a priority but were more interested in looking after the interests of the sponsor, which was usually a pharmaceutical company or, rarely, a device manufacturer. However, sometimes the learning needs of the doctors and the selling needs of the sponsors were the same.

Except for a few of us, most others did not mind this dichotomy, and for most, the monthly outing with dinner and drink thrown in was a welcome relief from their stressful lives.

This was the time, 35 years ago, the idea of starting a study group of doctors occurred to me. My practice those days was semi-urban, though today it is fully urban, and in the vicinity there were four GPs, two of them senior to me. I felt I should moot the idea with them first. The first worthy I went to thought I was a patient and I could see the disappointment on his face when he came to know that I was a fellow GP and possibly a competitor. He was polite but dismissive of the idea and told me to my face that he gets enough update from pharmaceutical company representatives. I later came to know that he never attends any professional meetings but still was quite successful and no wonder he felt mine was a

wasteful venture. The other senior was also lukewarm to the idea but felt he may not be able to attend given his busy schedule.

The other two agreed and we set up a meeting at my home. For want of an appropriate name, we called it 'Doctors club'.

Within a few years, the club grew to 15 members who lived in different parts of the city. We decided to put a cap at 15 as we found it difficult to host more than this number in our homes. From the beginning, we were clear, the meeting will be in our homes and the expenses will be borne by the member doctor and the hostess and no outside agency will be involved. As the meeting is held on Sunday afternoons, once a month followed by high tea, alcohol use rarely came into the picture.

The two hours is spent on difficult case discussions, journal updates; and sometimes, another specialist is invited as a guest, especially if he is involved in treating a case that is being presented.

Are all the original members still active? Sadly, some seniors have passed away and new ones, by invitation have taken their place. There is a waiting list and I suspect they expect us, seniors, to vacate our seats!

This monthly activity has led this group of doctors to become good family physicians, and I suspect their rate of referrals and needing specialist help is far less than others. It has fostered friendship, based on respect and affection to each other and their families.

Don't we attend the professional meetings organized and sponsored by pharmaceutical companies? Of course, some of us do, even I did occasionally when I found something of use in the agenda. Lately, however, with the advent of internet-based learning and start of the Karnataka chapter of the Academy of Family Physicians of India, I have found no need even for this.

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